

Unit Eight: Popularization of Buddhism in India

The Buddha did not have large gatherings in order to present his doctrines. Normally he preached to individuals or small gatherings. He started his teaching career with a group of five ascetics. When one became his follower with the achievement of his religious goal, the follower was given the responsibility of propagating the teaching of the master. The Buddha never became exhausted in teaching his doctrine to any one even at the time of lying on his death bed. It was reported that when he was lying on his death bed, he allowed a wandering ascetic to come near him and ask what he wanted to get the answer.¹ During his whole life the Buddha walked the streets alone in order to find the listeners. Even though some people insulted him, he never turned back without preaching his doctrine to them.² The mission started by him in a small scale finally flourished and resulted in a great scale.

It is evident from the references in the early Buddhist discourses that Buddhism came to be occupied in the mind of the people as their religion in a major portion of northern India during the life time of the Buddha. Out of the sixteen countries or kingdoms, which existed during the time of the Buddha in northern India, **Magadha** and **Kosala** were politically and commercially the more powerful and prominent states. It was reported that the Buddha spent most of his life in these two kingdoms. King Bimbisara and Ajatasattu of Magadha and king Pasenadi Kosala of Kosala became the main patrons of Buddhism. King Bimbisara was reported to have donated one of his gardens known as Veluvana to the Buddha as the first monastery.³ The Buddha was very much loved by king Kosala to the extent that on one occasion the king prostrated himself before the Buddha and stroked the Buddha's feet covering them with kisses.⁴ His association with the Buddha was so frequent that the whole of the third Samyutta of the Samyutta Nikāya, consisting of twenty five discourses, is devoted to him.⁵

It can be stated that most other kingdoms were also under the influence of Buddhism as there are references to the Buddha having visited many of these countries. The Buddha preached his first sermon at the deer park of Barānasi, which was the capital of the **Kāsi** kingdom.⁶ It is reported that the Ratana-sutta was preached by the Buddha at the request of the people of Visālā, which was the capital of **Vajji** kingdom, when there was a devastating famine.⁷ The group of six monks known as Chabbaggiya, who were the rebellions among the monastic community of the Buddha, also belonged to the Vajji kingdom.⁸ The Final Parinibbāna of the Buddha took place at the Sāla garden of Kusinārā, which belonged to the **Malla** state. On the way to Kusinārā for his Parinibbāna, the Buddha was reported to have visited many cities and villages and preached his teaching to the people in the Vajji state.⁹

Many hundreds of monks, who were involved in a debate over the Dhamma and Vinaya, which caused the Buddha to leave the monks to live alone in the Pārileyyaka forest, are said to be the

¹ D. Mahā parinibbāna-sutta. (PTS) 111. P.

² M. Aggika-Bhāradvāja-sutta

³ Mahavaggapali

⁴ Majjhimanikaya 11, No. 120

⁵ Samyutta-nikaya, Kosala-samyutta

⁶ Samyutta-nikaya, LVI, 11

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⁹ D. Mahaparinibbāna-sutta

residents in Kosambi, the capital of **Vamsa** state.¹⁰ Kammāsa-damma was a village in the **Kuru** country, where the Buddha delivered several of the most important discourses such as Mahāsatipatthāna and Mahānidāna. The discourse of Ratthapāla was preached by the Buddha to Ratthapāla, who was the noble in Kuru.¹¹

Another country in northern India, which came under the influence of Buddhism, was **Avanti**, which was the birth place of elder Mahākaccāna,¹² who was given first place among the monks, who explained in detail what was preached in brief by the master.¹³ Mathurā, the capital of Avanti, is reported to have been visited by the Buddha.¹⁴ The Madhurā sutta of Majjhima-nikāya was preached by elder Mahākaccāna to the king of Mathurā some time after the Buddha's Parinibbāna.¹⁵

Nonstop dedication of the Buddha for his mission, his pleasant appearance, sticking ability of his presentation, pleasing characteristics of his teaching mainly contributed to the rapid popularization of Buddhism in different parts of northern India. It seems that the Buddha expected to reach his message to the maximum number of people. Therefore, he sent his monastic disciples to propagate his teachings in different directions of the country. It is said that when there were sixty arahants for the first time who, were well deserved for the propagation of the teaching of the master, the Buddha informed them to go forth preaching the Dhamma for the benefit of the people, without taking one road way by the two.¹⁶ With the achievement of their personal goal, all the monastic disciples of the Buddha, living among the men, too contributed much for the propagation of Buddhism.

The causes that led to the popularization of Buddhism during the time of the Buddha

Contribution of the Buddha

Among many reasons that led to the rapid popularity of Buddhism, the special personal qualities of the Buddha, which were not found with other masters of religions of the day, can be regarded as the most important reason which attracted many people towards him. Some discourses record the saying of the people as to why they should visit the Buddha instead of the Buddha visits them. The following canonical reference helps us to decide as to the qualities of the Buddha to which, people preferred:

"Now listen, gentlemen, as to why it is fitting for us to visit the reverend Gotama, and why it is not fitting for him to visit us. The ascetic Gotama is well-born on both sides of pure descent to the seventh generation, unbroken, of irreproachable birth. He went forth, leaving a great body of kinsmen. In fact he gave up much gold and wealth to go forth, both hidden away and openly displayed. The ascetic Gotama, while youthful, a black haired youth, in the prime of his young

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¹² M. 2. 83

¹³ A. Etadaggapali

¹⁴ A. 2. 57

¹⁵ M. 11, No 84

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days, in the first stage of life went forth from the household life into homelessness. Leaving his grieving parents weeping with tear-stained faces, he went forth into homelessness.

He is handsome, good-looking, pleasing, of the most beautiful complexion, in form and countenance like Brahma, of no mean appearance. He is virtuous, of increasing virtue, endowed with increasing virtue. He is well-spoken, of pleasing address, polite, of pure and clear enunciation, speaking to the point. He is the teacher of many. He has abandoned sensuality and dispelled vanity. He teaches action and the result of action, honouring the blameless Brahmin way of life. He is a wanderer of high birth, of a leading Khattiya family. He is a wanderer from a wealthy family, of great wealth and possession. People come to consult him from foreign kingdoms and foreign lands."

This good report has been spread about him: "This Blessed Lord is an Arahant, a fully enlightened Buddha, perfect in knowledge and conduct. He bears the thirty two marks of a Great Man. He is welcoming, kindly of speech, courteous, genial, clear and ready of speech. He is attended by four assemblies, revered, honoured, esteemed and worshiped by them."¹⁷

From the above mentioned reference, we can pick up some of the important qualities of the Buddha, which receive the honour and respect of the people. People seem to consider with high esteem, (i) the family background, (ii) personal appearance, (iii) virtuous conduct, (iv) politeness, and (v) knowledge and understanding of the Buddha. Apart from these qualities, we can become acquainted with many more capacities of the Buddha, which paved the way for popularization of his religion, if we examine the discourses of the Buddha. The most striking factor among them was his incomparable ability of presentation of the Dhamma to others. He was able to present his doctrine in a way that the listeners or the audience easily can understand it. His presentation of the Dhamma involved both his communicative skill and intellectual skill.

It is a well-known fact that the people who listened to the teachings of the Buddha, were in different intellectual levels. On the one hand, the Buddha wanted to make them known by means of language what he realized was really profound, deep, difficult to see and difficult to understand¹⁸ and on the other hand, he wanted to present a path which can be followed by every one for the achievement of the desired end. Out of the above mentioned two tasks, the former involves communicative skill, and the latter with intellectual skill.

It can certainly be mentioned that the Buddha had exhibited a marvelous and perfect communicative skill in his teaching. His success in communication is attested by the discourses themselves. In the *Maha-saccaka-sutta* the Buddha was reported to have said: "Now I Aggivessana, am aware that when I am teaching Dhamma to companies consisting of many hundreds, each person thinks thus about me: 'The recluse Gotama is teaching dhamma especially for me'".¹⁹

All the teachings of the Buddha were oral sermons delivered to different people on different occasions. As Dr. Asok Kumar Chatterjee pointed out "the sermons themselves were not prepared beforehand, but were delivered on the spur of the moment, sometimes simply as

¹⁷ D. Sonadanda-sutta, Translation by Maurice Walshe, p127.

¹⁸ "Adhigato kho myayam dhammo gambhiro duddaso duranubodho..." Ariyapariyesanasuuta, M.I.167

¹⁹ Maha-saccaka-sutta. M.I.249

answers to questions put by some layman. He had to modulate his statements in order to suit the understanding of the person addressed".²⁰

Taking not only the intellectual ability but also the nature of the temperament of the person or group of persons concerned into his account, the Buddha was reported to have presented his teachings successfully and effectively in a way that most of the listeners expressed their satisfaction and the delightfulness over what the Buddha had spoken to them. Almost all the discourses of the Buddha, which addressed the lay people, included a passage at the end of the discourse, which contained the view of the listener about the particular discourse. It runs thus:

"It is wonderful, good Gotama; good Gotama, it is wonderful. It is as if, good Gotama, one might set upright what had been upset, or might disclose what was covered, or might point out the way to one who had gone astray, or might bring an oil lamp into the darkness so that those with vision might see material shapes (rūpāni) - even so is Dhamma made clear in many a figure by the good Gotama. I am going to have revered Gotama for refuge, and to Dhamma and to the Order of monks. May the good Gotama accept me as a lay-follower; one gone for refuge from today forth for as long as life lasts."²¹

When we examine the discourses, it is evident that there are mainly two types of sermons, which refer to the methodological means of the explanation of the dhamma by the Buddha namely, round-about sermons (*sappariyāya desanā*) and direct sermons (*nippariyāya desanā*). In the round-about sermons, again we can see two different ways of explanations. The former is to explain one and the same topic in different figurative ways giving many more examples, evidences, comparisons and similes etc. When the Buddha gave a sermon such a way, it is the common expression of the listeners that "even so is dhamma made clear in many a figure by the Blessed One" (*evem evam Bhagavatā anekapariyāyena dhammo pakāsito*).

In the case of the later, details relevant to a topic of *dhamma* are given more or less to suit the requirement of the person concerned. For an example, on some occasions the Buddha analyzed empiric individuality (person-*Puggala*) into two groups namely, name and form (*nāmarūpa*), sometimes into five groups of aggregate of grasping (*pañcupādānakkhandha*), again, into twelve faculties (*dvādasāyatana*) and on another occasion, into eighteen elements (*attarasadhatu*). In such a case the Buddha declared that the dhamma is taught figuratively by me (*pariyāya desito kho pana mayā dhammo*). It was a way to explain the same doctrine to different people in different ways to suit their need.

There were some occasions where the Buddha presented his doctrine in the direct way (*nippariyāyena*) without talking in figurative manner. There can be seen however, some more different methods used by the Buddha in his teachings, which can include either *sappariyayadesana* or *nippariyayadesana*, such as explanation in brief (*sankhittadesanā*) and explanation in detail (*vitthāradesanā*). The Buddha made use of these different methods, knowing the requirement of the people who listened to his teaching.

²⁰ Ashok Kumar Chatterjee, The Yogacara Idealism, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, Delhi, 1999, p.24-5.

²¹ Cūlāhatthipadopamasutta, The Middle Length Sayings, 1.230

Specialty of the Dhamma

Special characteristic of the Dhamma also was one of the reasons that led to its popularity among the people. Indian society during the time of the Buddha was accustomed with plenty of religious and philosophical systems introduced by different thinkers. *Brahmajāla-sutta* talks about sixty two philosophical views existing during the time of the Buddha. But, the Buddhism overcoming all those religious and philosophical systems not long after its introduction was able to win the hearts of the people.

Buddhism was really a new religion to the society. In its essence, it was not indebted to any religion or any philosophy existing in its background. It was a middle doctrine in its theory and practice. It rejected all the extremist theories and practices. It complied with the religious demand of the people and it addressed all the aspects of the people. Therefore, Buddhism was a mixture of religion, philosophy, doctrine, ethics, psychology, sociology, economy and polity.

An attempt has been made by some modern scholars to say that Buddhism is not a new religion and it is a development of the existing philosophical thought in the background of the Buddha. *S. Radhakrishnan* observes:

"Buddhism did not start as a new and independent religion. It was an offshoot of the more ancient faith of the Hindus, perhaps a schism or a heresy."²²

And further he asserts:

"The Buddha did not feel that he was announcing a new religion. He was born, grew up, and died a Hindu. He was restating with a new emphasis the ancient ideal of the Indo-Aryan civilization."²³

It must be stated that to see Buddhism as a new religion at its inception, one has to give up one's own religious bias. Though *S. Radhakrishnan* says that Buddhism was an offshoot of the more ancient faith of the Hindus, he failed to identify what that so-called faith of Hindus was. It is a common acceptance that the Buddha did not present a speculative philosophical system based on logical reasoning. If it is so, there is no room to assume that Buddhism is a development or a culmination of any faith. Buddhism is nothing but the personal realization of the Buddha. His realization consisted of two things, that is to say *idappaccayatā paticcasamuppāda* and the *Nirodha* (of suffering). It is true that in explaining these two doctrines, the Buddha made use of the existing terminology of the philosophical field. But, the essence or the contents of the doctrines which, imparted through the terminology, is quite far away from the existing systems of thought.

Further, Buddhism was endowed with new characteristics of its own which were not available in the existing religious systems. People were not forced to accept it without inquiry. Freedom of investigation was highly valued in Buddhism. It made an open invitation to all to come and see (*Ehipassiko*) the truth of it. The truths of Buddhism were not based on the metaphysical speculations and logical assumptions. It was one of the special features of Buddhism that it was free from metaphysics and was against the speculations arrived at logical reasoning. Therefore, the Buddhist achievements were purely based on the experience (*paccattam veditabbo*) through the practice.

²² 2500 Years of Buddhism, ed. Prof. P.V. Bapat, The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956, P. xiii

²³ Ibid. P. ix.

Another special characteristic of the doctrine of the Buddha is that it can be followed by any one irrespective of one's intellectual level. Buddhism is a process of realization. It is a gradual process going from stage to stage, from shallow to depth. *Pahārāda-sutta* of *Anguttara-nikāya* compares Buddhism with the ocean which has the gradual low-lying (*anupubba-ninno*), sloping down (*anupubb-pono*) and inclining to the depth (*anupubba-pabbhāro*). Just like the ocean, Buddhism too has gradual discipline (*anupubba-sikkhā*), gradual activities (*anupubba-kiriyā*) and gradual practice (*anupubba-patipadā*).²⁴ Because of this characteristic of the Dhamma, it was not difficult for people to enter into the Dhamma from any stage according to their intellectual capacity. Therefore, many people irrespective of their social and intellectual status, were converted to Buddhism, realizing its suitability to their life.

Dedication of the Sangha

Another vital factor which contributed immensely to the propagation of Buddhism was the monastic community of the Buddha. The Sangha or the monastic community of the Buddha was really the living embodiment of the Dhamma. The monks engaged in the missionary activities after having achieved their own goal of the life. So, they were fully qualified for the work for other's welfare. The Buddha acknowledged the fact that the mission of the monks would be successful if they are in the proper place for that. Therefore, he advised them to keep first themselves in the proper place and then to admonish others.

Attānam eva pathamam – patirūpe nivesaye

*athaññam anusāseyya – na kilisseyya pandito*²⁵

Sometimes, the Buddha asked them not to give up the work for their own achievement, even for the sake of many works for other's (attadattham paratthena-bahunāpi na hāpaye).²⁶ The Arahants, who were fully qualified for the missionary works, are said to be those 'who have done what had to be done' (*katakicca*²⁷) and therefore, they had nothing further to do for them (na aparam itthatthāya²⁸). They had led their remaining life for the sake of other's welfare.

Among the monks and nuns who lived during the time of the Buddha, there were some monks who were equipped with special talents, which were quite effective for their missionary works. There were both monks and nuns who were able to give detailed exposition to what was preached by the Buddha in brief. *Thera Mahākaccāna* and *Theri Dhammadinnā* were considered highest among such monks and nuns respectively.²⁹ *Thera Kumāra Kassapa* had the excellent ability of preaching Dhamma in variegated manner.³⁰

²⁴ *Pahārāda-sutta*, *Anguttara-nikāya*

²⁵ Dp.

²⁶ Dp

²⁷ D. *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ A. *Etadaggapali*

³⁰ Ibid

Equal religious freedom

The women and the low cast people, who were deprived of religious rights under the Brahmin's authority and their supremacy, gained a new hope for their life and were delighted with the religious achievements that they had under the guidance of Buddhism. Buddhist proclamation of equal religious rights for all was quite conducive for Buddhism to win the heart of the people. The permission granted by the Buddha for women to enter into the inner circle of the Buddhist organization further strengthened the popularity of Buddhism.

Royal Patronage

It is a normal trend that the subjects of a country willingly prepare to embrace a religion which is favored by the king of that country. At the very beginning of Buddhism, the Buddha was able to attract King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha towards his teaching. The king was a devotee of the Buddha for his whole life and he donated his Bamboo Grove to the Buddha and his monastic Order as the first monastery of Buddhism.³¹ Pasenadi Kosala, the king of Kosala also was a pious Buddhist who constantly met the Buddha and discussed some religious matters with the Buddha. The Buddha mostly lived during his mission in Magadha and Kosala. Embracing Buddhism by the two kings of these two countries was itself a reason for their followers to become Buddhist. Sonadanda-sutta of Digha-nikāya nicely presents this fact as follows:

"Indeed king Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha has gone for refuge to him together with his son, his wife, his followers and his ministers. So have King Pasenadi of Kosala and the Brahmin Pokkharasāti. He is revered, honoured, esteemed and worshiped by them."³²

Support of the people of higher ranks of the society

People of higher ranks of the society such as ministers, millionaires, scholars and the like of a society are also very much affective and influential over their supporters and followers. When they were converted to a religion, there was a tendency for their followers too to accept the same religion. The Buddha had many such dignitaries who had gone for refuge for their whole life. Millionaires like Anathapindika, Dhabjaya, viśakha; famous scholars like Pokkharasati were among those dignitaries who supported the Buddha in many ways. According to Samantapasadika of Buddhaghosa, there were eighteen great monasteries in Rajagaha. Most of them were donated by higher ranking people to the Buddha and the Sangha. For the propagation of Buddhism they were highly helpful.

³¹ Vin. Mahāvagga

³² D. Ambattha-sutta, translation by Maurice Walshe, p.128.